THE VISION OF DANTE

BY ELIZABETH HARRISON

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER CRANE

DANTE

THE VISION OF DANTE

A STORY FOR LITTLE CHILDREN AND A TALK TO THEIR MOTHERS

BY

ELIZABETH HARRISON

SECOND EDITION

ILLUSTRATED BY WALTER CRANE

PUBLISHED BY THE CHICAGO KINDERGARTEN COLLEGE
ART INSTITUTE BUILDING, CHICAGO, ILL.
1894

COPYRIGHTED
By ELIZABETH HARRISON
1892

The Lakeside Press
R. R. DONNELLEY & SONS CO., CHICAGO

PREFACE.

Is not the reason why the Divine Comedy is called a "world poem" to be found in these significant facts: it portrays the sudden awakening of a human soul to the consciousness of having gone astray; it shows the loathsome nature of sin; it pictures the struggle necessary to be freed from sin; it emphasizes that God is ready to help as soon as the soul is ready to be helped; and at last it declares that the Vision of God will come to the soul which perseveres in the struggle? These are the essential truths which make the great poem of Dante one of the masterpieces of the world of art. May not it — as well as all other truly great things — be given to little children in a simple way?

THE VISION OF DANTE.

WANT to tell a wonderful story to you, dear children. It has been told over and over again for six hundred years, yet people keep reading it, and re-reading it, and wise men never tire of studying it. Many great artists have painted pictures, and sculptors have made statues, and musicians have composed operas, and clergymen have written sermons from thoughts inspired by it. A great poet first gave it to the world in the form of a grand poem which some day you may read, but I will try to tell it to you to-day as a short story. I am afraid that you would go to sleep if I should undertake to read the poem to you. You do not yet know enough about life to understand it.

Once upon a time, very long ago, there was a man whose name was Dante. He had done wrong and had wandered a long way from his home. He does not tell us how or why. He begins by saying that he had gone to sleep in a great forest. Suddenly he awoke, and tried to find his way out of it, first by one path and then another; but all in vain.

Through an opening where the tall trees had not grown quite so thick, he saw in the distance a great mountain, on the top of which the sun was shining brightly. "Ah!" thought he to himself, "if I can but reach the top of that mountain I am sure I can see a long way in every direction. No woods can grow tall enough to keep me from finding my path then!" So with fine courage he started toward the mountain, but he had not walked far when a beautiful, spotted panther stood with glaring eyes in his pathway. He trembled, for he knew that going forward meant that he would be destroyed. He turned hastily aside into another path, but he had gone only a short distance in this direction before he saw a huge lion coming towards him. In greater haste than before he turned into still another path. His heart was beating very fast now, and he hastened along without taking much notice of what lay before him. Suddenly he came upon a lean and hungry wolf, which looked as if he could devour half a dozen men. Dante turned and fled back into the dark woods "where the sun was silent." He thought, "What is the use of trying to get out of this terrible forest? There are wild beasts on every side. If I escape one I am sure to be devoured by another; I might as well give up trying." He had now lost all hope.

Just at this moment he saw a man coming towards him. The face of the man was beaming with smiles as if he had some good news to tell. Dante ran forward to meet him, crying, "Have mercy on me, whoever you are! See that

COPYRIGHTED 1892

beast from whom I have fled! My body is trembling yet with fright."

The strange man, whose name was Virgil, told Dante that he had come to help him, but that they would have to go by another path to get out of this savage wilderness. He then explained that they must go down through a deep, bad smelling and dark hole in the ground, and must meet with many disagreeable things and crawl through much dirt and filth; but after they had gone through this close, dirty tunnel, they would again see the light, and if they had strength enough to climb, they might in the end get to a delightful spot on the top of the mountain called the Terrestrial Paradise, from which lovely place Dante could go home if he wanted to.

At first Dante was afraid to go with Virgil, although he had often read the wise and noble books which the latter had written. But when he heard that BEATRICE, whom he had loved as he loved no one else on earth, had come from heaven in the form of a bright Angel to urge Virgil to come to him, his heart was so filled with joy that he at once renewed his courage, and told Virgil to go forward, promising that he would trust him as a guide.

They then began their perilous journey. The dark pit through which they were to pass was the shape of an immense funnel, or a cone turned upside down. It was so large that it reached from the surface down to the very centre of the earth; so that though it was as twilight where they entered,

and was quite wide and airy, yet as they slowly travelled down its rocky sides the place grew darker and narrower, and the air more stifling, and the smell was worse than anything of which you have ever dreamed. At times Dante nearly fainted, but Virgil put his arms around him and held him up until he revived. I will not stop to tell you of all the horrible experiences they went through. By and by, when you grow to be men and women, you can read the whole poem for yourselves.

At last they reached the bottom of the foul pit; it was the very centre of the earth, and was the darkest spot possible. Then they began to climb through a narrow opening which they saw. They wanted to get to the surface on the other side of the world, and again see the light of the sun.

Dante felt as if he were escaping from a terrible plague-stricken prison-house. The first things he looked at were four beautiful stars shining far above his head; then he knew he was where he could get fresh air and light, for he felt sure that where stars were to be seen air and light could be found. They soon discovered that they were on a large island, in the middle of which stood a great mountain. This, Virgil told Dante was the mountain which they would have to climb.

It was Easter morning!

As they were looking about them, not knowing exactly which way to turn, they saw an old man with a long white beard. His face was so radiant that it reminded Dante of the stars at which he had been gazing. The old man told them

where to go to begin the ascent of the mountain. But he said that Virgil must first get the grim and dirt off of Dante. You know we can not very well go into dirty places without having some of the cinders and ashes and other filth stick to us. He also kindly told them where they could find some easily bent rushes which they could use to gird up Dante's long cloak, so that he might climb the better.

I think it must have been the old man's kindness to the many strangers who came to the island that caused his face to look so beaming as to remind Dante of the stars. Poor Dante thought over all his past life, how he had wandered away from his home, how he had found himself in the gloomy woods, how he had met the fierce beasts, and last of all he thought of the blackening dirt he had gotten on himself in coming through the deep hole. Then he thought of his rescue from all these evils, and the tears rolled down his cheeks. Virgil spread his hands out upon the grass, still wet with dew from heaven, and with the moisture thus gained he washed Dante's face. The tears Dante was shedding helped also to wash away the dirt.

After this they went to where the rushes were growing and gathered some for a belt for Dante. Strange as it may sound to you, dear children, as fast as they gathered one rush another sprang up in its place. They bound these enchanted rushes around Dante's waist, and he was now ready for the upward climb and was quite eager to begin.

They turned and looked once more at the ocean. Dante's

eyes were just beginning to get used to the sunlight. Suddenly he saw a strange white light coming along the sea towards them. He was astonished. As it came nearer and nearer the light grew more and more dazzling, and Dante saw that it was a *glorious and radiant angel!* He fell upon his knees and dropped his gaze to the ground, for the face of the angel was so bright that he could not look upon it. The strange and beautiful being came swiftly forward, bringing with him a small boat full of people, the very water became resplendent with light as the boat moved swiftly through it, yet the angel had neither oar nor sail. His shining wings, spread high above his head, seemed to waft the boat along by some invisible power. He landed the people, and—quick as a sunbeam, was gone.

The newly arrived souls came up to Dante and Virgil and inquired the way, for they too were going up the steep rough mountain, around which wound a difficult path. The end of the path no one could see. They walked along together for a short distance, and while Virgil was searching the ground for the right path, Dante lifted his eyes upward and saw some people looking over a rocky wall that bordered the road on the next bend above them. To these fellow-travellers he called for help, as he felt sure they must have found the right road up the mountain's side. They gladly pointed out the spot where Virgil and Dante could find the way, and soon our two travellers were upon it.

But now arose a serious difficulty. From the grow-

COPYRIGHTED 1882

ing twilight they knew that night was coming on, and in this strange, new country nobody dared travel in the dark. There were too many pitfalls and stumbling blocks to make it safe to travel without the light of the sun. Virgil knew that the wisest and best thing to do in hours of darkness was to keep still and wait for more light. A man whom they had met on the road pointed out a safe little valley where they could stay until the sunlight came once more.

Ah, how I wish you could have seen that valley!

It was called the Valley of the Princes. As they approached it a vision burst upon them of the loveliest spot that could be imagined. If gold and silver and scarlet and green and blue and all the finest colors in the world were put together into a flower garden they would not make anything half so beautiful as was this Valley of the Princes. Not only were the colors so fine, but the perfumes were the sweetest ever breathed. They went quietly and slowly into the valley and sat down. The air about them grew darker and darker as the sun set behind the mountains.

All at once Dante heard some voices singing a gentle hymn. I think it must have been a hymn something like our own little hymn, "Wearily at Daylight's Close," for it made Dante think of the Heavenly Father, and look up into the sky, whose only brightness was the stars shining far above his head. As he looked he saw sweep down out of the high heavens two glad angels of God, robed in pale shining green. Each was surrounded with a radiance so bright that it was

dazzling; both carried swords of fire. Lightning never came from the sky more swiftly than did these two angels. They separated as they approached the earth; one placed himself upon the mountain on one side of the valley and the other upon the mountain on the other side. Dante wondered what all this meant, but the man who had told them where to find the valley was still with them. He explained that the angels had come to protect all travellers who were staying in the dark valley until light should come again and they could see to go forward.

Just then Dante turned and saw a great ugly snake winding its way silently through the grass. Quick as a flash of lightning one of the angels descended from his high post, and, with a touch of his flaming sword, turned the snake, which fled in dismay. Then Dante knew that the angels had indeed been sent from heaven, and in his heart he felt very glad that all through this dark night he might be sure of their protecting love. He then quietly laid himself down upon the grass and went to sleep. While sleeping he had a strange dream; an eagle of fire seemed to be bearing him up through the air.

He awoke. It was morning; the sun was shining and the birds were singing. Flowers were blooming all around him—and yet it was not the same place in which he had gone to sleep. He saw on looking about him that he was farther up the mountain side. He turned questioningly to Virgil, who soon told him that while he had slept in the

Valley of the Princes another angel, named Lucia, had been sent from heaven to bear him in her arms over the rough places where he could not have travelled unaided, and that he now stood at the real entrance of the path up the mountain.

"We must pass through that gate which you see in front of you," said Virgil, "and before you enter it I must tell you that there will be some very hard climbing for you and sometimes you will grow weary and discouraged, but be assured that it will become less painful as you climb. The hardest part is the first part. It grows easier and easier as you near the top, until, when you reach the Terrestrial Paradise, there will be no longer any climbing at all. There you shall again see your beloved Beatrice and she will reveal to you a VISION of GOD HIMSELF."

With this they started towards the gate. Now I must tell you about this gate, children, because it was a very peculiar gate, and some of these days you may have to go through it yourselves. As they came near, Dante saw that it had three broad steps leading up to it. The bottom step was like polished marble, and so shining that you could see your face reflected in it. Each traveller who approached it saw just how unclean he was, or how tired, or how cross looking. The next step was a dark purplish black step. It was cracked lengthwise and crosswise, and had a sad look about it as if it were sorry for the reflections which it saw in the bottom step. The third step

at the top was red, so red that it reminded Dante of blood. Above this towered the great gateway. Upon the sill of this gate sat another wonderful angel in shining garments which were brighter than the noon. His feet rested upon the top step.

As Dante and Virgil approached, the angel asked them what they wanted. They told him that they wished to go through the gate in order that they might climb the mountain. The angel leaned forward, and with the edge of the sword which he held in his hand he printed on Dante's forehead seven letters. Dante knew that the seven letters stood for the seven things that were wrong inside of his heart. Then the angel took from his side a silver key and a golden key, and unlocking the gate with each, he let it swing wide open on its hinges, and our two travellers passed through.

They had no sooner entered than they heard a man singing praises to God. As they travelled along the path which wound upward, they saw upon the rocks at their sides wonderfully carved pictures of people who had been good and kind and always thoughtful of others instead of themselves. As Dante looked at them they seemed to him to be the most marvellous pictures he had ever seen. He thought within his heart, "How beautiful!" "How beautiful!" "How I wish I could be like these people!" Then he turned and looked down upon the rocks on which he was treading, he saw there were more carvings upon the stones below; but these

were of people who thought of nobody but themselves—haughty people, selfish people, and idle ones.

As Dante gazed upon them, he bowed himself lower and lower, for he thought within himself, "I fear I am more like these people than I am like the others." He had been a very proud and haughty man in the past, and now he knew how ugly and selfish that haughtiness was. As he ascended the road, he must have prayed to God to make him more like the beautiful and gentle people whose portraits he had seen upon the rocks at his side. He had been walking, bent very low; all at once he straightened himself up; he felt as if some great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He turned to Virgil, saying, "Master, from what heavy thing have I been lightened?" Virgil glanced up at his forehead. Dante stretched forth the fingers of his hand and slowly felt the letters which the angel had placed upon his forehead. There were but six. There had been seven. Virgil smiled, and the two passed on.

Their ears caught the sounds of voices singing in sweet tones, "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" Then Dante knew that the other souls, too, had prayed to God to take pride and haughtiness and selfishness out of their lives.

They passed along the higher terrace on the mountain side, and here they saw no pictures, but heard strange, sweet voices singing through the air. These voices were singing of the people who had been glad when others were made happy,

who had loved and praised the good in those about them, who had rejoiced when some one else besides themselves had been commended. The voices seemed so joyful as they told of these loving hearts, that Dante shut his eyes and listened. Soon he heard other voices tell of the people who had liked to talk of themselves and not of others, who did not care to hear anybody else praised, people whom it made unhappy to know that anybody else was happy. "Ah!" thought he to himself, "I fear, I fear that I have been like these last people of whom the voices tell such sad, unhappy things. How I long with all my heart to be freed from this hateful thing, called *Envy!*" Then again he prayed to God to help him to rejoice over the happiness of others, to be willing to help others, and to realize that others were helping him; and as he thought these thoughts and prayed this prayer, another burden seemed lifted from off him, and he put his hand to his forehead and found that another of the terrible letters was gone. He had but five remaining on his forehead now, and already the climbing seemed easier.

They came soon to another very difficult passage in the road, and so rough and sharp were the rocks which stood in the pathway that Dante's heart failed him, and he must have stopped in his onward journey up the mountain had not another loving angel of God come from some unseen point, and, lifting him with strong arms, carried him over the hard place, setting him again upon his feet. I think Dante must have thanked God for thus sending him help in his moment of

COPYRIGHTED 1892

discouragement; at any rate, he felt that he had been slothful and not eager enough to reach the top of the mountain.

On and on he travelled, sometimes with voices in the air singing to encourage him, sometimes with warnings coming from unknown quarters. The very trees laden with fruit on the roadside seemed to say, "Take enough of us, but do not eat too much; a glutton cannot see God."

As they mounted higher and higher the landscape grew broader and broader, and more filled with a strange new sunshine. The huge bowlders and angry-looking rocks below, which had so frightened Dante as he began his journey, seemed now scarcely larger than pebbles and little stones. He smiled to think that he had ever cared for them at all. All weariness was gone, the last of the mysterious letters had vanished from his forehead, and the one longing of Dante's heart was to meet again his beautiful and beloved Beatrice, and be led by her into the presence of the GREAT GOD OF THE UNIVERSE, who had so wonderfully and so mysteriously sent HIS angels to help him on the way.

At last they reached the spot called the Terrestrial Paradise, and there, as Virgil had told him, stood his loving Beatrice, who took him by the hand and led him up into Heaven itself, beyond the clouds, beyond the stars, beyond planets and worlds, even to the foot of the THRONE OF GOD!

Of this I cannot tell you. No words of mine could make you see that glorious vision as Dante then beheld it. Your own little hearts must be freed from all wrong thoughts, from

all evil motives, from all selfish desires, must be filled with a love of others, and with generous willingness to do for others, and then may come to you, too, some day, this GREAT VISION that came to Dante.

THE VALUE OF THE STUDY OF DANTE TO MOTHERS.

THE last two centuries have been largely scientific and analytic. The effort has been to get away from the pictorial and symbolic, to get at the *exact facts*. Yet, after each new step forward in exact thinking, comes the reaction toward the more poetic forms of thought. The human imagination becomes hungry and demands that it shall have its share of intellectual food as well as the human reason. This is the secret of the power which the world's great poets have always exercised. They throw essential truth back into its embodied or symbolic form, so that the imagination may see it pictured forth even where the reasoning power is not strong enough to grasp it in its abstract form.

The "myth" has always been the great educator of the race. The mighty prophets and seers of the past ages have ever made use of it as a means by which to express God's messages to mankind.

Froebel, the apostle of childhood, illustrates to the mother how she can give an impression of a great spiritual law by means of a certain poetic presentation in play. He then adds:

> "Behold then in this little play
> A world-wide truth set free!
> Easily may a symbol teach
> What thy reason cannot reach."

In fact, almost all of the kindergarten songs and stories and games have in them an inner or symbolic meaning. They not only teach to the child the facts of the world about him and guide him to observe accurately such properties of matter as form, color, number, position, size, etc., but they give him much deeper, more significant impressions of higher things.

One can see, at once, the direct connection between the study of the great poets of the world—there are not more than half a dozen of them—and the nursery and the kindergarten. The mother-heart of the race has instinctively felt this connection, and the folk lore of the ages has been handed down to us in nursery tale and childish legend. But the educators of older people do not always make use of the pictured forms of truth. The greatest educator that earth has ever known spake not unto the multitude—except by parables. His method of teaching has never been excelled.

The study of Dante emphasizes the value of the poetic

form of expression for the experiences of the human soul. The Divine Comedy can be looked at in many ways, literally, politically, artistically and ethically. We could regard it merely as the imaginary experiences of a man who suddenly awoke and found himself in the midst of a dark wood, who in trying to find his way out was met by a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf. He turns back in despair to the place "where the sun is silent," but is met by the poet Virgil, who offers to show another way out, and so on. These mere literal facts of the poem could not cause it to live in the hearts of men for six hundred years.

Some commentators have explained the poem to be the political disappointment of Dante, pouring itself out in bitter though brilliant imagery. The leopard is Florence, the lion is France, the she-wolf is the Papal power of Rome. But Florence and France and Rome have passed out of their supremacy in the minds of men, and the Divine Comedy still keeps its hold upon the affections of mankind. Some other meaning must lie in the poem, else we would not be studying it to-day.

Is it not this? Dante is giving us an account of the soul's estrangement—that soul is his own soul, yet it mirrors also each soul which has wandered "from the true path." In fact it describes the spiritual struggle of every soul which has felt that it was out of harmony with the divine order. The beasts of selfishness, of pride and of greed have stood in the way and obstructed the return to the path of light.

The great question is, How can this soul get back into the right path? It is the old story of Adam and the fall of man retold. It is the picture which every great poet holds up—man's soul in a state of estrangement, and the struggle to get back to "the peace of God which passeth all understanding." This will explain why the human heart for six hundred years has read and re-read the great poem of Dante.

Marvellous and significant indeed are the lessons which we can learn from it—lessons which can be applied every day to our own lives and the lives of those about us, who are groping blindly in "the dark wood," yet who are longing to get out of their vice, or doubt, or despair. Is it self-indulgence? Is it inordinate ambition, or is it greed of possession (not always money possessions) which stands in the way? Must we pass through an inferno of suffering, and learn by experience that God's way is the best way, or, can we learn that the way of the transgressor is hard from this great drama; learn, as it were, by "vicarious experience" instead of actual experience? Rightly understood, this is the office of every great soul, to save its fellow-mortals if possible from sin and suffering. Thus the Divine Comedy becomes the shield of Perseus in which the terrible gorgon head of evil may be seen and comprehended without withering or turning to stone the life that comes in contact with it.

I know of no study more helpful to mothers than this

same study of Dante. The nature of every sin is pictured forth by its symbolic punishment. The sharp distinction between sins of impulse and sins of intent is made, and the close connection of the will power with right and wrong doing is clearly shown.

Elizabeth Harrison.